DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 480 891 CS 512 426

AUTHOR	Smith, Carl B., Ed.
TITLE	Making Presentations. ERIC Topical Bibliography and Commentary.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Institute of Education Sciences (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	TBC-030012
PUB DATE	2003-09-00
NOTE	5p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0028
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E. 10th St., #140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698. Web site: http://eric.indiana.edu.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- ERIC Publications (071) -- Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Audience Awareness; Bibliographies; *Communication Apprehension; *Communication Skills; High Schools; Higher Education; Multimedia Materials; *Public Speaking; *Speech Skills
IDENTIFIERS	*Oral Presentations; Public Communication; Research Summaries

ABSTRACT

This topical bibliography and commentary consists of research summaries which address the challenges of creating an effective public presentation. The research articles discussed in the bibliography/commentary are geared toward teaching students to better present information with an emphasis on the primary importance of content above empty showmanship. Guidance is offered for better using multimedia to enhance the transmission and reception of information, and concerns, such as public speaking apprehension (PSA), persuasiveness, and evaluation are addressed. The bibliography/commentary concludes that effective public presentations are the result of carefully sequenced and graduated learning. It stresses that helping the student identify the needs of the audience and the intended effect upon them is a necessary component to deciding how the information will be presented. Lists 3 Internet resources and 28 references. (NKA)

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Topical Bibliography and Commentary

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TBC-030012

Making Presentations

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ED 480 891

Introduction

The following summaries address the challenges of creating an effective public presentation. They are geared toward teaching students to better present information with an emphasis on the primary importance of content above empty showmanship. The temptation to overwhelm an audience with technical dexterity is quite real. The articles discussed offer guidance for better using multimedia to enhance the transmission and reception of information. The articles address concerns such as public speaking apprehension (PSA), persuasiveness, and evaluation. These articles are aimed at high school and college students but are applicable in business as well.

Oral Presentations

At the heart of nearly all presentations are the oral skills of the presenter. Iain Hay (1994) writes about the need for geography students to develop effective oral communication skills, but the argument can be extended to students throughout higher education. He begins by addressing two misconceptions found among his students; "the development of oral communication skills is not a legitimate component of a university geography course" and "a capacity for public speaking is one of those innate abilities which some people have and others do not" (Hay, 1994, p.1). Fundamental to Hay's argument is the idea that "education ought to encourage mutual understanding and contribute to personal and societal emancipation–releasing people from a variety of constraints and ideologies" (Hay, 1994, p.3). While his use of theoretical language broadens his topic, the main focus of the argument is simple: students need to effectively communicate their findings to others and to judiciously evaluate the presentations of others. The warning given by Hay is that a poor message may be more effectively communicated than a good or valuable one.

Similarly, Eun Young Choi (1998) discusses the classroom situation where the best students benefited from programs emphasizing the principles of presentation. Confidence in public situations is not an accurate indicator of aptitude, but listeners are still apt to make such a connection. Borzi and Mills (2001) also suggest the use of classroom activities to help students overcome the fear of public speaking, reduce their communication apprehension, and improve their confidence in group settings. Benjamin R. Barber (1989) contends that not only is effective public communication a necessary exercise in the classroom or boardroom, it is constituent of a strong democracy that citizens engage in political or public talk.

The value of effective oral communication skills is raised by an intriguing study which investigated the use of PowerPoint software in place of traditional overheads in classroom presentations. The data suggested there was little difference in test scores between those who experienced the PowerPoint presentation and those who did not; which led Christine Ahmed (1998) to the conclusion that a good teacher is what really matters.

Persuasiveness in Public Presentations

"Effectiveness" in public presentations is often a term used synonymously with "persuasiveness" to indicate the perceived impact upon one's audience. To varying degrees, most speakers desire acceptance from their audience and, therefore, an element of persuasion is usually involved. Stephen D. Boyd (1990) provides a list of 17 general textbooks and 19 research references aimed at examining the variety of approaches used in persuasive communication.

Julia Cothorn (1993) examines ways in which teachers can more effectively teach students not only to conduct better scientific research but also how to successfully present those results in competitions. While the emphasis is clearly on scientific investigation, the final section of this book deals with many of the issues found in other works about presentation skills; namely, developing positive attitudes among students, tips on making effective oral presentations, preparing judges, and selecting competitive events.

Whether an author speaks of effectiveness or persuasiveness in public speaking, the common thread is an emphasis on audience receptivity. Although the means discussed to improve the ability to relate with an audience are abundant, there are clearly a number of general guidelines held in common.

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Tactics for Improving Public Communication

Harry Grover Tuttle rejects the simple prioritization of innate abilities over preparation when he writes that good multimedia reports, "require a structured introduction to multimedia resources and techniques" (Tuttle, 1995, p. 28). A starting point is the subject of public speaking apprehension (PSA). The means of relaxing PSA is most often a graduated process. Rejecting the notion that it is better to simply throw students into unfamiliar and deep waters, both Nilsson (2001) and Hay (1994) suggest short, impromptu presentations by students about work they have already done. Informal introductions and presentations (such as interviewing one another) are also what Sheila Hannigan (1996) uses for the First Day Activities in her 12-week course for improving presentation skills. Nanci M. Burk (1997) maintains that the inclusion of personal narratives is an effective tool for empowerment and for developing trust among participants in the classroom. There are several benefits to a carefully sequenced and graduated exposure to public communication:

> This gradual process of confidence building and coaching has been appreciated by students with whom it has been developed and it has certainly produced positive results in terms of student presentation competence. It is helpful, however, to make clear to students that the small steps being taken throughout a course are intended to contribute to the development of skills, which might be used in the final, formal presentation. These reminders help to make the final task seem a little less foreboding, as well as indicating to students that a carefully thought-out teaching strategy is being applied. Any feelings that the final presentation is an ill-considered and stressful testing exercise may thus be dispelled. (Hay, 1994, p. 5)

The preparation of student presentations is one that must be carefully sequenced. In Hay's experience, where oral presentations are supplemental to the course and are not the subject matter *per se*, students need to be convinced of the importance of their presentations. As would be helpful in any class which is not specifically designated as a "speech course," Hay suggests increasing student investment in the oral presentations by several means, including closely connecting the presentations to course subject material and including the content of the presentations in the examinations. By doing so, states Hay, both the presenter and the listeners know that attention must be paid. Further, if teachers give detailed directions on how oral presentations can be evaluated, peers can play a significant role in assisting each other to improve their presentation skills by providing detailed feedback to each speaker (Patri, 2002).

Assessment and Standards

A standard procedure for feedback and evaluation is also needed if the presentations are going to have real value. The challenge for the instructor is to make the process as objective as possible. Comments such as, "it was good," or, "I didn't like it," are of limited value. Hannigan offers a number of useful suggestions to help student-evaluators become better at the process of critiquing:

1. Give feedback honestly. Be specific. Ex: "Your voice was powerful."
2. Describe, not evaluate. Ex: "You used your hands to talk, all I could do was watch them."
3. Give positive feedback—find something.
4. Negative feedback—should be constructive, not critical. Reinforce with positive.
5. Video feedback—students get immediate reaction and see themselves.
6. Peer feedback—students evaluate each other's work. (Hannigan, 1996, p. 30)

Hay includes an "Oral Assessment Schedule" in his article. This Schedule is designed to confront the difficulty of relying too heavily upon an evaluator's subjectivity. The Assessment Schedule proposed by Hay offers a number of "criterion-referenced" (or "standards-based") tools that help remove the uncertainty often surrounding such evaluations. Hay's criteria include the speaker's appearance, presentation structure, body of presentation, and conclusion. In addition to these standard categories, or Aspects, which largely involve preparation, Hay's Schedule also allows for what might occur during the actual presentation by including additional Aspects: such as coping with questions, delivery, visual aids, handouts, and target audience (Hay, 1994, pp. 10-11).

Donald L. Rubin (1998) touches on the subject of national standards (content) for oral communication. Such standards clearly presume the likelihood that the evaluation process can be made objective enough for educators to adopt certain recommendations based upon five principles regarding speaking/listening/viewing.

The use of the video camera in the classroom is growing in popularity as an assessment tool for public presentations. Much of the focus in Sheila Hannigan's (1996) work centers on presenting for the camera. Ron Martin (1987) uses the video camera to record "booktalk" presentations. Martin gives suggestions for appropriate books to use, the important characteristics of a booktalk, and a sample evaluation form. Debbie M. Ayres (1995) discusses the use of videotape as a means of reducing PSA among at-risk children, with apparently successful results.

Many of the strategies aimed at reducing PSA are borrowed and adapted from drama exercises. The clearest example of this is, again, Sheila Hannigan who includes in each of her classes time for warm-ups, vocal exercises, and creative dramatics (role playing, improvisations, and other physical exercises). The following authors include exercises based upon dramatic art:

- Doreen S. Gonzales (1989) suggests using radio drama as a means of encouraging students to explore the joys and excitement of public speaking.
- "Speaking and Writing Skills for Educators" (1993) includes suggestions for "essential" communication skills such as movement, eye contact, and use of space.
- Robert J. Garmston encourages educators to see the sites of presentation as theatrical spaces, with an emphasis on setting the stage, using the set, including props, and considering oneself as the ultimate prop.

Multimedia Presentations

As more and more classrooms and other sites of presentation become increasingly multimedia-ready, with the inclusion of overheads, video equipment, and computers, it is likely that most presentations will include some aspect of multimedia. It is not the lack of multimedia abilities that is the trouble for many presenters, it is the overabundance. Too often multimedia presentations sacrifice content for flashy techniques and students need to be explicitly taught how to tailor their multimedia presentations to meet the needs and interests of their audience (Pathak, 2001). Tuttle is primarily concerned with helping students develop on-screen computer presentations designed to be used without the author's assistance. In other words, the program must be user-friendly. As a way of combating the lure of technical cleverness evident in many students, he suggests the following tips for keeping the presentation on track: maintain a consistent message, use a consistent format, use graphs and symbols that replace wordiness, and strive to make the presentation as interactive as possible (Tuttle, 1995, p. 30).

While Elizabeth P. Tierney's (1995) focus is on helping scholars develop more effective presentations, mostly through an awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses, she also includes a chapter on multimedia aids such as notes, handouts, and visuals. A few chapters in a volume edited by Craig Newburger (1994) also give attention to multimedia presentations: "Using Interactive Video Instruction to Enhance Public Speaking Instruction" and "Computer-Mediated Communication in the Basic Communication Course." Jim Sellers (1987) also discusses handouts and audiovisual aids as a way of enlivening public speaking.

Conclusion

The articles discussed above basically have in common an emphasis upon oral communication skills as the foundation for better presentations. From this foundation, various authors discuss the inclusion of multimedia as a means of enhancing public presentations. Also addressed is the need for students across the educational spectrum to be encouraged to develop their presentational abilities, and not to view such abilities as superfluous to one's research. The sharing of information requires effective communication skills no matter what the area of primary study.

Effective public presentations are the result of carefully sequenced and graduated learning. The fear of public communication (PSA) must be addressed, often by borrowing techniques from dramatic exercises. The evaluation of content in public presentations needs to be made as objective as possible, not only so that the teacher can more effectively comment on what the student has done, but also so that the student has access to the criteria during the preparation process. Helping the student identify the needs of the audience and the intended effect upon them is a necessary component to deciding how the information will be presented. The use of multimedia can be effective, but presenters should guard against an over-reliance upon technical ability that might confuse or detract from the content.

Internet Resources (University based websites that offer students guidelines for making oral presentations)
*The University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, http://lorien.ncl.ac.uk/ming/Dept/Tips/present/present.htm
*Department de Langues et Formation Humaine, http://www.int-evry.fr/lfh/ressources/presentations/ops1.htm
*Rubrics for Multimedia presentations and projects:
http://ali.apple.com/ali_media/Users/111/files/others/multimedia.pdf
http://www.ncsu.edu/midlink/rub.mmproj.htm
http://www.prestonwoodchristian.org/ustech/MultimediaProjectEval.html

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ERIC TBC #030012 was published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E. 10th St., #140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698, Tel. 1-800-759-4723. Full text at: http://eric.indiana.edu. ERIC Topical Bibliography and Commentary summaries are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced. This project is funded at least in part with Federal funds from the US Department of Education under contract ED-99-CO-0028. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of the US Dept. of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the US Government.

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